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Being the Tutor Students Need

Clayton Lords
Utah State University

Utah State University

Clayton Lords

English 4910

Star Coulbrooke

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Abstract

In writing center culture, there is a prevailing idea that there is one ideal way to tutor students. However, in reality it becomes increasingly clear that each writer's needs are unique and that tutors need to be much more malleable in their approach to tutoring. In this paper, we explore the reasons we hold back from being flexible, and specific things we can do to change this.

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Clayton Lords

Star Coulbrooke

ENGL 4910

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One of the most common themes of discussion among writing centers is the idea of prioritizing the student's needs. Meanwhile, there is another prevalent idea that content and ideas are the most important focus, while grammar and mechanics are considered less significant. To reconcile these two ideas, we seem to have this vision of an ideal tutoring style. In general, we have an idea of what the ideal session looks like: we begin with a friendly greeting, we ask about the assignment and what the student's questions are, and then we ask thoughtful, open-ended questions to guide the student through the learning process. Along the way, we do our best to help them focus more on their content and ideas and less on unimportant topics. We also tend to idealize a non-directive tutoring style, where the student takes the lead of the session while the tutor takes a hands-off approach. While these elements can certainly create an effective mode of tutoring, it does raise some questions. Is it really ideal to approach each session in the same way, and to ask the same type of questions? Is it wise to assume that the same priorities apply to each student and each piece of writing? Moreover, in being so concerned with following one style intended to focus on the student's needs, do we ironically end up misplacing those very needs? In consequence, tutors need to employ a variety of tutoring styles in order to focus more on being flexible and open-minded so that they can truly conform to the student's needs.

In order to learn how to be more flexible in tutoring, we need to first understand what prevents us from doing so. One factor that can prevent us from deviating from our usual tutoring

style is guilt. When we take a different approach in an effort to address a specific need, we may feel that we are doing things “wrong.” As a result, we feel we have broken some set of rules and that we have failed to be an effective tutor, leaving us feeling guilty. In her tutor’s column for the University of Maine, Katelyn Parsons suggests the following:

> Some tutors experience guilt if they think they failed to make writers feel better. In what situations do tutors feel the most guilty?...Jennifer Nicklay insists that writing tutors feel more guilt when they employ directive tutoring styles rather than minimalist ones. Nicklay references Susan Blau and John Hall's findings that "consultants in their center felt guilty for stepping outside the 'rules'" (16). This guilt stems from the tutors' ideas about what type of work they should be doing based on writing center orthodoxy ("rules").

In other words, when tutors feel it is necessary to take a different approach to their tutoring by being more direct, they feel that they are breaking some sort of rules--the “ideal” tutoring approach discussed earlier. This is a mindset that needs to be corrected if we are to adapt to the student’s specific needs.

Reality shows us many reasons why we shouldn’t feel guilty for taking different approaches to tutoring. There are multitudes of unique writers, each with their own set of needs and ideas. There are equally many tutors, each with their own strengths and weaknesses and experiences. This means that it invariably becomes necessary for us to approach a tutoring session in a unique way. With this in mind, consider Stephen Corbett’s ideas on tutoring styles:

> In the “real world” of intellectual peer critique, we realize that sometimes it's all right to give a pointed suggestion, to offer an idea for a subtopic, to give explicit direction on how to cite sources, to offer examples of alternate wording and

> sentence constructions—in short—to practice along a continuum of instructional choices both collaborative and empowering, allowing for alternate moments of interpersonal and intertextual collegiality and agency-building.

This clearly shows that there are many situations where it is helpful--or even essential--to use other tutoring styles to adapt to certain needs. As Corbett explained, sometimes there are situations where it would be detrimental to use the typical "ideal" style of open-ended questions and student-directed sessions. Instead, there are some situations where it is beneficial to include direct suggestions, or to correct grammar errors instead of focusing on content and organization. Overall, each writer is going to need different types of knowledge, so tutors need to readily adapt their styles to supply that knowledge.

To be clear, it is still very important to employ the typical non-directive style; there are many instances where it is a valuable teaching tool. What is important is to remember that it is only one of many tools available to tutors to use differently to suit the situation. In her article "The Tutoring Style Decision Tree: A Useful Heuristic for Tutors", Teresa Henning uses a visual diagram (the "Decision Tree") to describe several methods that tutors can use to decide how to approach a student's needs. She explains that there are essentially three different types of knowledge that students many need, with three different tutoring styles to accompany them. Specifically, when a writer needs "objective" knowledge, which exists apart from the writer and the tutor, then the tutor can use a directive tutoring style. Henning gives the example of a student needing information about MLA format: correct formatting does not change between students or tutors. The tutor can use a directive approach to simply explain the mechanics of correct formatting and offer direct suggestions. Meanwhile, if a student needs "subjective" knowledge, which is known only by the writer, then non-directive tutoring is appropriate. One example of

subjective knowledge would be a writer's personal experiences, which are known to the writer, but not to the tutor. A tutor could use the non-directive approach to help the student refine that knowledge and express it through writing, even though the tutor doesn't possess that knowledge. Finally, Henning describes how students may need intersubjective knowledge, which is created in the interaction between them and the tutors. In this situation, tutors can use a collaborative approach, such as brainstorming, to create the knowledge that the student needs.

By basing our tutoring style on the type of knowledge the student needs, we remove our perceptions of how our tutoring session is "supposed" to go. As a result, our tutoring becomes less formulaic and more individualized. In the end, this is the true goal of a writing center: to give writers the help that they need. By approaching tutoring with a more open-minded and flexible mindset, we have the freedom to choose how to help individuals according to their unique situations.

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